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TAGS: MO PBTS PHUM PREL

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: A TOUGH SPEECH CAPS A MOMENTOUS WEEK FOR THE KING

REF: A. RABAT 431
1B. RABAT 461

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) King Mohammed spent five days in the Western Sahara, March 20-25, his first visit to the disputed territory since March 2002. The timing of the visit, coming amidst a public consultation process on autonomy and private diplomacy by Moroccan Deputy FM Fassi Fihri with Paris and Washington, and perhaps London, seems specifically designed to reaffirm -- whatever lies ahead -- Morocco's utmost determination to hold on to the Western Sahara and to continue a process leading to autonomy whether it has international buy-in or not. (The English text of the King's speech can be found at www.moroccotimes.com).

¶2. (C) Key events during the King's five-day visit included:

-- the King's March 21 meeting with Libyan envoy Ahmed Qadhaf al-Dam, in what we believe is the first meeting between a Moroccan king and a foreign official in the Western Sahara since the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1974. Al-Dam reportedly stressed Libyan support for the unity of the Maghreb in public remarks following the meeting.

-- the King's reportedly spontaneous March 22 visit to Maatallah, a neighborhood rocked by pro-independence demonstrations over the last eight months and supposedly a bastion of anti-Moroccan sentiment. The King was shown shaking hands with residents of the neighborhood.

-- During a March 21 speech, GOM Communication Minister Nabil Benabdullah indicated in public remarks from Laayoune that Morocco's autonomy plan could be delayed to ensure that the GOM had sufficient time to analyze the various proposals from Moroccan political parties, due for submission to the palace on March 31.

-- On March 20, the King announced the pardoning of 216 Sahrawi prisoners. Absent from those pardoned were several prominent Sahrawi activists, such as Ali Salem Tamek and Brahim Dahane.

-- the King inaugurated numerous development projects

throughout the visit totaling millions of dollars in apparently new assistance. The projects included upgrades in health, clean drinking water, sanitation, port expansion, literacy programs, and mosque construction.

The King's Speech

¶3. (U) The climax of the visit, however, was the King's televised address to the nation from Laayoune on March 27, his final act before departing the territory for Casablanca. In front of the entire cabinet and assembled Sahrawi tribal and local leaders, the King delivered a short, hard-hitting speech reaffirming Morocco's unwavering commitment to the Sahara. Juxtaposing the country's adherence to the Sahara with praise for the Moroccan armed forces, the King emphasized "we shall not give up one inch of our beloved Sahara, nor a grain of its sand." He stressed Morocco's commitment to autonomy, situating it as a national project and reaffirming that the consultation process now underway, "which is making headway," will lead to a "final solution to the artificial dispute over the Moroccanness of our Sahara."

¶4. (U) The centerpiece of the speech, and now to Morocco's way forward, however, was the revitalization of the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS), which has been largely moribund for the last several years. The council will be expanded to 134 members, the vast majority of whom are Sahrawis (or at least have Sahrawi names), including 14 women and the father of Polisario President Abdelaziz, now about eighty years old and residing in Morocco. There is no timeline in the speech as to when the council is to conclude its work or make recommendations, beyond a statement that, "in the not too distant future," the King hopes it will be possible "to fashion a national, realistic perception for a self-rule formula."

¶5. (U) The King selected as head of the CORCAS the current mayor of Laayoune, Khali Henna Ould Er-Rachid. Er-Rachid has never figured prominently in Saharan affairs, though he has held numerous visible posts, such as Secretary of State in charge of Saharan Affairs from 1979-1983, and Minister in Charge of Development of the Southern provinces in 1985. Er-Rachid has been active in Moroccan political parties as well. In a March 6 meeting with him at his home in Rabat (Ref A), Er-Rachid remarked to us that he himself had not been consulted for his views on autonomy, a remark that seemed to capture some of the hesitation or passivity that characterizes the process of national consultation (Ref B) underway since early March.

Comment

¶6. (C) There is little in the King's actions from the last week, from beginning to end of this Sahara sojourn, that suggests a spirit of compromise on the way ahead. Rather, the King has reaffirmed, in no uncertain terms, his intention to forge ahead with an autonomy plan whose implementation will hinge less on international support and more on its adherence to Morocco's needs. While the events of the last week may not be intended as deliberate provocations, we see no olive branches either to Algeria, the Polisario, or dissident Sahrawis in the King's speech; in fact, we have received several reports that additional Sahrawis have been detained, including some embassy contacts, since the King arrived in the Western Sahara one week ago. Nevertheless, in the coming weeks, we will be interested to see whether our initial skepticism of the CORCAS proves unfounded, or whether the new Council can spearhead a serious attempt at getting widespread Sahrawi buy-in for the way ahead.

Riley